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SUBJECT: MALDIVES: PROTESTERS DETAINED AFTER DEMONSTRATION  
IN CAPITAL TURNS VIOLENT

REF: 04 COLOMBO 1337

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SUMMARY  
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1. (U) An unknown number of arrests were made in the Maldivian capital of Male' late August 13 after protests against the arrests of three prominent opposition activists turned violent. National Security Services (NSS) forces were called in to assist the police in quelling the disturbance after demonstrators overwhelmed the police. The Government alleges that "a large cache of blunt and sharp weapons" were found at a "rally headquarters" used by the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), a charge the MDP Spokesman disputed. A curfew was imposed in the capital from 12:00 a.m. - 4:00 a.m. August 14. As of mid-day August 14, the situation had returned to normal, but both the Government and MDP do not rule out the possibility of additional disturbances later in the evening. We have received no reports of Americans affected by the incident. The Embassy continues to follow the situation closely. End summary.

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ANNIVERSARY OBSERVANCES TURN VIOLENT  
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2. (U) Police arrested an as-yet undetermined number of protesters late August 13 after a demonstration by Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) sympathizers demanding the release of three party members detained the previous day turned violent. Speaking to poloff by telephone on August 14, Government Spokesman Mohamed Shareef said that the protests, which began in a residential area of Male' about 4:00 p.m. local time, deteriorated into violence about four hours later, as demonstrators reportedly began throwing stones and bricks at police. Two policemen were severely injured in the melee, Shareef reported, including one who was reportedly pulled off his motorcycle and beaten up by the mob. According to Shareef, police used tear gas to disperse the protesters about 10:00 p.m. local time. (Note: A reporter for a local newspaper and a Maldivian employee of a multilateral organization who observed the demonstrations told us in separate conversations that the police also charged demonstrators with batons; Shareef, on the other hand, said that no baton charge occurred.) The demonstrations, however, continued until midnight when the streets were finally cleared after the government announced a midnight - 4:00 a.m. curfew. Shareef said that calm had returned to Male' at OOB August 14 (schools, businesses and government offices are open on Sunday), but said he feared further disturbances might occur later in the evening. To avert that possibility, the police were "trying to identify the ringleaders" who incited the previous evening's violence, he said. Shareef added that he was in the process of confirming the number of arrests or injuries resulting from the August 13 incident, but assured us that the ICRC and family members would be given access to detainees.

3. (SBU) Because the police had been unable to control the disturbance, Shareef reported that the National Security Service (NSS) were called in to assist in quelling the violence. The August 13 disturbance was particularly worrisome to the Government, Shareef said, because it occurred in a densely populated residential area where innocent bystanders could be easily caught up and injured in the violence. The NSS "worked in partnership with the police" to restore order, Shareef said, for the first time since the formal separation of the civilian police from the NSS last year. He emphasized that anyone detained in connection with the disturbance is now in police custody and that no Members of the Special or People's Majlis are among the detainees.

4. (SBU) The August 13 violence appears to have been sparked by the Government's response to a (at least initially) more peaceful demonstration held by MDP party members the previous day to mark the one-year anniversary of the detentions of pro-reform activists by the Government (Reftel). MDP Chairman Mohamed Naseem and several others who

staged a sit-down protest after Friday prayers August 12 were urged to disperse by police, Shareef reported, but refused, eventually drawing a crowd of about 300 which later became unruly and attacked police. Even though Naseem and other MDP council members were not themselves acting violently, Shareef acknowledged, they were nonetheless arrested and detained by police as "catalysts" of the disturbance. Shareef confirmed that 38 protesters, including Naseem, remain in detention.

15. (SBU) Following Naseem's arrest, the NSS later on August 12 raided an MDP "rally headquarters," recovering a "large cache of blunt and sharp weapons," according to a faxed report the Embassy received from the Maldivian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. When asked about this report, Shareef said that besides retrieving approximately 100 steel rods and "mallets" from the site, the NSS had also apprehended a man "red-handed" in the act of operating a machine to cut the steel bars into uniform size, which the man allegedly admitted were to be distributed among demonstrators to wreak further havoc. The security forces then destroyed the site, according to Shareef (the "rally headquarters" seems to have been a tent-like, temporary structure), but the office headquarters of MDP remain open.

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OPPOSITION DISPUTES CHARGES  
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16. (SBU) MDP Spokesman Mohamed Latheef, who lives in self-imposed exile in Colombo, disputed the Government version of events in a separate conversation with poloff on August 14. Charging that President Gayoom is attempting to "bleed the country to death," Latheef accused the Government of perpetrating the violence itself through proxy "private militias." While acknowledging that his daughter, who had been initially detained by police August 12, had been released, Latheef alleged that Naseem had been "beaten up" before being taken into custody. The "weapons" found by the NSS at the MDP site, Latheef contended, were no more than construction materials that the landlady had been keeping since before the MDP rented the "rally headquarters" at a neighboring construction site on the same property. Latheef said he challenged the NSS to turn over its findings to any impartial authority to assess their credibility, asserting that the investigation could not stand up to even "minimal scrutiny." He added that he feared further disturbances could erupt.

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NO REPORTS OF AMERICANS AFFECTED  
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17. (U) The Embassy has received no reports of Americans affected by the August 12-13 unrest in Male'. (Note: Most foreign tourists, who stay on separate resort islands and enter and leave the country via a separate "airport" island, never visit Male'.) We will continue to follow the situation closely.

ENTWISTLE